

Making sense of being a returner: the (many) trade-offs of opting back in

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Opting out and opting in experiences are a growing topic in the academic literature. This paper intends to shed light on the individual outcomes of returners programmes that are now quickly developing in the UK after the concept was first pioneered by Goldman Sachs in 2008 in the US. While there is a wealth of literature (Zimmerman and Clark 2016) exploring women's reasons for opting out, changing career values and barriers to opting back in (e.g. Cabrera 2007; Hewlett and Luce 2005; Stone and Lojevoy 2004, 2012, 2019), there is limited research on professional women's re-entry experiences (Panteli and Pen 2008; Rieger et al. 2018; Stone and Lovejoy 2019). Building on 65 qualitative interviews with employers, consultants, and women returners (30) this paper explores the process by which women returners have joined one of these programs, their experience and how they make sense of their returning journey.

Previous research has shown that many women either return to traditionally female jobs on re-entry or work contingently on the perimeters of their former professions (Hewlett and Luce 2005; McGrath et al. 2005; Stone and Lojevoy 2019). In contrast, returners programmes allow women to return to their former professions and/or the same industry, even when they had a long break. In view of the often challenging and unsuccessful attempts they had previously made to return to predominantly male-dominated workplaces, most interviewees were therefore grateful for the opportunity that was given to them to make a comeback. Although some deplored the need for returners' programmes, they appreciated the 'soft landing', and the support provided, including setting up a cohort of returners, coaching sessions, and mentoring, to ease their return in organisations and professions that had sometimes changed considerably.

That said, the whole returning process was mostly described as a challenge. Our research confirms many individual concerns regarding lack of confidence, skill obsolescence, and work-life balance issues (Lovejoy et Stone 2012, 2019). Some returners have applied to many different programmes and spent a lot of money on coaching sessions and CV editing. Not only are these programmes very selective and demanding, but some professions, particularly health-related ones, require unpaid training hours or renewed accreditations that women returners need to finance and/or organise themselves. Moreover, some programmes are quite competitive with a low retention rate, and post-programme positions can be insecure, and frequently involve the acceptance of lower paying and non-managerial jobs as well as decreased (or uncertain) career development. While most programmes offer flexible working and since Covid, remote working, the relatively short period for proving oneself encourages women to put in more hours than expected, while remaining the primary caregiver.

Most of the women interviewed justified the colossal efforts they had to make to comply with the 'ideal returner' expectations during their onboarding period - updating their skills, building up an internal network and displaying proactive and enthusiastic attitudes – to secure

a permanent position as the cost to regaining a sense of self-esteem and professional worth, as well as financial independence. Framing their returning experience as a 'learning experience' or accepting to being treated as a 'distress asset' (that needs rescuing) is a way for them to make sense of their loss of professional status and salary, while regaining a professional identity to which they have remained profoundly attached (even when they often enjoyed their time away from work).

Overall, this paper intends to contribute to extant literature on women's re-entry strategies by providing in-depth analysis of the experience of (middle-class) women returners in the UK context, the objective and subjective trade-offs they must accept, and the influence of socio-economic factors (age, length of the break, profession, nationality) and organisational contexts on the assessment of their returning journey.